

Foaling and Mare/Foal Aftercare

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Last month we discussed preparation for foaling. This piece will be dedicated to the actual foaling process and the treatment of the mare and foal after foaling. By now you should have decided if your mare will foal indoors or outdoors. There are benefits and drawbacks to both, but if the weather will allow it, I prefer foaling mares on good clean grass pastures. They're more natural, generally more hygienic, and much roomier. The pasture or paddock should be grass covered, fairly level, and free of objects that may injure the mare or newborn foal such as barbed wire, creeks, or ponds. Remove other animals from the pasture that may interfere with the mare or injure the foal. If the decision is to foal the mare indoors, provide her with a large stall (at least 14 ft. X 14 ft.) recently cleaned, disinfected, and well ventilated. Before placing the mare in the stall, give it a thorough inspection and eliminate hazards such as raised nails, large splinters, and water buckets. Good clean, dust free straw is the preferred bedding as wood shavings can be inhaled by the newborn foal or aspirated into the mare's vagina, causing uterine infections that may delay rebreeding.

It is always a good idea to make preparations for foaling well in advance and to have a plan in case something goes wrong. The vast majority of mares will foal at night when activity around the barn is minimal. Write your veterinarian's phone number down, as well as a backup veterinarian, and have it by the phone in case a problem develops. If the mare has a history of foaling problems, it would be a good idea to have a stock trailer or roomy horse trailer hooked up and ready to go, just in case. Foaling supplies should include a clean stainless steel or new plastic bucket; a watch to time each stage of labor; clean tail wrap material; a flashlight; several large, clean towels; mild iodine or chlorhexidine solution for disinfecting the foal's navel; a fleet enema for the foal, a halter and lead rope; and mild soap to wash the mare's vulva and hindquarters prior to foaling. All of the items can be stored in a large, sealable plastic 5-gallon bucket and left near the stall door. Check into an alternate source of colostrum. Mares on fescue grass pastures or have dripped colostrum prior to foaling may not have adequate colostrum for their foal, so it's wise to locate alternate colostrum sources. Many large veterinary practices or broodmare farms maintain colostrum banks and are happy to supply it in an emergency.

It's always difficult to predict exactly when your mare will foal, but as they near the foaling date their udder and teats will fill with milk. The muscles in the mare's pelvic region will begin to relax and their vulva will swell and relax. Most mares will develop beads of colostrum on the ends of the teats within 12 to 36 hours of foaling and is referred to as 'waxing'. The actual foaling process occurs in three stages:

- **Stage one** - involves the mare's initial uterine contractions as the foal is moved into the pelvis. It may last 30 minutes to several hours and usually manifest as colic like symptoms with the mare pacing around the stall, sweating, looking at her flanks and getting up and down as the process begins.

- **Stage two** - includes the rupture of the water bag, signaling the foal is moving through the birth canal and foaling is imminent. Stage two should last no more than 20 to 30 minutes. This is the crucial time as problems can occur during this stage such as malposition or premature separation of the placenta. Normally, a foal's front legs will emerge first with the foal's nose resting near the fetlocks. Problems to watch for are one foot and the foal's head or both legs but no head. These are signs of a malpresentation and your veterinarian should be called immediately. The other problem to be aware of is when the feet are presented with the soles up and the head has not appeared. This indicates the foal is being born hind legs first. The problem with this delivery is the umbilical cord is likely to break before the foal's head clears the birth canal and the foal may suffocate. In this situation, the foal should be delivered as soon as possible. In normal foal births, the membranes covering the foal's legs and nose appear as a white, transparent membrane. If the membrane appears velvety red it indicates the placenta has separated too soon and the foal is no longer receiving oxygen. This is a true emergency. The red membrane should be cut open immediately and the foal delivery assisted as the foal will suffocate within minutes if not delivered.
- **Stage three** - is the passage of the placenta and should happen within three hours. If it is not passed by three hours your veterinarian should be contacted as retention can cause laminitis and other serious problems.

Healthy normal foals will begin to breathe immediately following birth and will rest on their sternum for several minutes before attempting to stand. If the white membrane covers the foal's nose, it should be removed to enable the foal to breathe. A good basic guideline following delivery is the One-Two-Three Rule:

- The foal stands within one hour (although most do within 30 minutes)
- Nurses by two hours
- Placenta passed by the mare & meconium (foal's first bowel movement) by three hours

It is important to allow the mare and foal to bond immediately following foaling so minimize your contact with them for the first hour or so unless a complication occurs. Umbilical cord care is important. Most foals will remain lying down for several minutes immediately after birth which allows placenta blood to be transferred to the foal. Once the foal stands, the umbilical stump should be dipped in an antiseptic solution such as mild iodine or chlorhexidine. If the mare has not passed the placenta and is stepping on it or it seems to bother her, tie it up on itself with a piece of twine. Under no circumstance should you attempt to cut it off or pull it out. If the placenta is retained for more than three hours, notify your veterinarian as treatment should be initiated as soon as possible to aid her in passing the placenta. Once the placenta is expelled place it in a bucket of water, place a lid on it, and save it so that your veterinarian can examine it when they do the mare/foal examination. If the mare appears agitated, or aggressive toward the foal, restrain her and consult your veterinarian for advice. This most often occurs in maiden mares that are foaling for the first time. The foal should pass the meconium, the first sticky, dark stool

within a few hours of birth. If this does not occur or the foal appears to be straining, acting restless or frequently switching its tail, a mild enema (4.5-ounce Fleet® enema) may be needed. It is vitally important that the foal ingests colostrum (the first yellow, sticky milk) within the first 12 hours of life. Colostrum is rich in antibodies that will help to prevent disease in the foal until its own immune system kicks in around three or four months of age.

Allow the mare to eat hay and drink as soon as she is ready. It's also a good idea to check the mare's temperature every 6-8 hours for the first 24 hours following foaling. The normal temperature for an adult horse is 100.5 degrees F. An elevated temperature may indicate an infection, while a decreased temperature may indicate serious blood loss and your veterinarian should be contacted. As a general rule of thumb, a mare/foal examination by a veterinarian should occur within 24 hours of a foal's birth. The mare will be examined to ensure she has not experienced severe trauma to her birth canal and is producing plenty of milk. The foal is examined to ensure that all body systems are working properly, the navel is drying up, and there are no birth defects present. The placenta will be laid out and examined to ensure that it is normal in appearance and weight and has been completely expelled. Blood will be drawn from the foal to be tested to ensure adequate amounts of antibodies have been transferred via its ingestion of colostrum. If the test reveals the foal's antibody levels are not adequate, specially prepared antibody rich serum can be given to the foal intravenously.

The birth of a foal is one of the most extraordinary events a horse owner can experience. Good preparation will allow you to enjoy it to the fullest. If you have questions about care of your pregnant mare, preparation for foaling or suspected problems with the mare or foal after foaling, your local veterinarian is the best source of information.